

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Encyclopedia of World Biography, December 12, 1998

Born: May 07, 1840 in Votkinsk, Russia

Died: November 06, 1893 in Saint Petersburg, Russia

Nationality: Russian

Occupation: Composer

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) is one of the most loved of Russian composers. He epitomized the ingenuous opening to the emotions of the romantic era in music, but his product was made durable through sound craftsmanship and rigorous work habits.

Eschewing the intellectual, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was in no sense a technical innovator; moreover, he attracted, and still attracts, the barbed clevernesses of those less trustful of emotional statement. But his work is always hotly defended as each generation discovers him afresh--a process considerably quickened by a massive and ever-growing body of literature about his music and his interesting, often tragic life.

Born on May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk in the Vyatka district, Tchaikovsky was the son of a well-to-do engineer. Peter and his brothers and sister received a sound education from their French governesses. He apparently showed no early signs of unusual musical talent but was duly exposed to the music lessons suffered by all young gentlemen. He later recalled growing up in a place "saturated with the miraculous beauty of Russian folk song" and the effect some music had on him as a child--that of exquisite torture so beautiful that he begged the music be stopped. He often referred to this in his letters as a mature artist.

Tchaikovsky attended a school of jurisprudence in St. Petersburg, and, while studying law and government, he also took music lessons, including some composing, from Gabriel Lomakin. Tchaikovsky graduated at the age of 19 and took a job as a bureau clerk. This was to be the first step of an official career, but he was already hopelessly enamored of music. He soon met the Rubinstein brothers, Anton and Nikolai; both were composers, and Anton was a pianist second only to Franz Liszt in technical brilliance and fame. In 1862 Anton opened Russia's first conservatory, under the sponsorship of the Imperial Russian Music Society (IRMS), in St. Petersburg, and Tchaikovsky was its first composition student.

Early Works

Tchaikovsky's early works were technically sound but not memorable. Anton Rubinstein was demanding and critical, often unjustly so, and when Tchaikovsky graduated 2 years later he was still somewhat cowed by Anton's harshness. In 1866 Nikolai Rubinstein invited Tchaikovsky to Moscow to live with him and serve as professor of composition at the Moscow Conservatory, which he had just established.

Tchaikovsky's father was now in financial trouble, and the composer had to support himself on the meager earnings from the conservatory. The symphonic poems *Fatum* and *Romeo and Juliet* that he wrote in 1869 were the first works to show the style he was thereafter to cultivate. *Romeo and Juliet* was redone with Mily Balakirev's help in 1870 and again in 1879.

During the seventies and later, there was considerable communication between Tchaikovsky and the

Rubinsteins on the one hand and the members of the Mighty Five, Balakirev, Aleksandr Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and César Cui, on the other. The traditional "enmity" between the two groups seems a concoction of romantic biographers. Tchaikovsky functioned as an all-around musician in the early seventies, and, as expected of an IRMS licentiate, he taught, composed, wrote critical essays, and conducted, the last not very well. In 1875 he composed what is perhaps his most universally known and loved work, the Piano Concerto No. 1. Anton Rubinstein was sarcastic in his dislike, although it became one of the most popular items in his own repertoire as a concert pianist. Vying in popularity with the concerto is Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake* (1876). It is the most successful ballet ever written if measured in terms of broad audience appeal.

A Disastrous Marriage

In 1877 Tchaikovsky married the 28-year-old Antonina Miliukova, his student at the conservatory; it has been suggested that she remained him of Tatiana, his heroine in his opera-in-process, *Eugene Onegin*. His unfortunate wife, who died insane in 1917, not only suffered violent rejection by her husband but also the vicious libel of Modeste Tchaikovsky, his brother's biographer. Modeste, like Peter a misogynist, vilified her in the biography in an attempt to shield Peter and mask his weaknesses. Subsequent biographers, uncritically and perhaps with relish, repeated and embroidered upon Modeste's assertion that Antonina was cheap, high-strung, and neurotic.

Tchaikovsky was scarcely to find out her character: within a few weeks he had fled Moscow alone for an extended stay abroad. He made arrangements through relatives never to see his wife again. In his correspondence of this period--indeed through a large part of his career--he was periodically morbid about all aspects of his life: about his wife, money, his friends, even his music and himself. He often spoke of suicide. This, too, is a favorite theme of his many biographers. Even during his life he was treated unkindly by critics who sharpened their sarcastic vocabularies on his open, vulnerable, emotionally based music. But he never sought to change his style, though he was dissatisfied, at one time or another, with most of his works; and he never stopped composing.

Arrangement with Madame von Meck

At about the same time as his abortive marriage, Tchaikovsky entered into a liaison of quite another kind. Through third parties an unusual but fruitful arrangement with the immensely wealthy Nadezhda von Meck was made: she was attracted by his music and the possibility of patronizing him, and he was frank in his interest in her money and what it could provide him. For 13 years she supported him at a base rate of 6,000 rubles a year, with whatever "bonuses" he could manage to extract. He was free to quit the conservatory, and he began a series of travels and stays abroad.

Von Meck and Tchaikovsky purposely never met, save for one or two accidental encounters. In their voluminous correspondence the composer discusses his music thoughtfully; it is disenchanting to note that in letters to his family he complains cavalierly of her parsimony. He dedicated his Fourth Symphony (1877) to her. Tchaikovsky finished *Eugene Onegin* in 1879; it is his only opera generally performed outside the Soviet Union. Other works of this period are the Violin Concerto (1881), the Fifth Symphony (1888), and the ballet *Sleeping Beauty* (1889).

Tchaikovsky's fame and his activity now extended to all of Europe and America. To rest from his public appearances he chose a country retreat in Klin near Moscow. From this was derived the "Hermit of Klin"

nickname, though hermit he never was. In 1890 he finished the opera *Queen of Spades*, based on Aleksandr Pushkin's story. As with many of his other works, Tchaikovsky was highly involved emotionally, and he was gratified when, despite the grouching "experts," the opera was enthusiastically received. In late 1890 Von Meck cut him off. He was self-sustaining by then, but the rebuff rankled. Even Modeste expressed surprise at his irritation. Tchaikovsky had an immensely successful tour in the United States in 1891.

The Sixth Symphony was first heard in October 1893, with the composer conducting. This work, named at Modeste's suggestion *Pathétique*, was poorly received, very likely because of the inadequate conducting. Tchaikovsky never knew of its eventual astonishing success, for he contracted cholera and died, muttering abuse of Von Meck, on November 6.

Tchaikovsky's gift was melody--sobbing, singing, exalting melody. Yet, one of his favorite and recurring melodic patterns was a simple five-or six-note minor scale, usually descending, which he enveloped in orchestral color or lush harmonies often electrifying in their piquancy and effectiveness.

Further Readings

- Tchaikovsky's story is obscured, first, by the work by his brother Modeste, *Life of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky* (3 vols., 1900-1902; English abridgment by Rosa Newmarch, 1906), which, while otherwise authoritative, cloaks vital segments of the composer's life; second, by puritanical attitudes which keep archives in Klin tightly closed; and third, by the opportunistic sensationalism of many writers who perform Freudian acrobatics with the few facts they possess of the composer's life. M. D. Calvocoressi and Gerald Abraham, *Masters of Russian Music* (1936), is sound, as is Abraham's *Tchaikovsky: A Short Biography* (1944), derived from the former work. David Brook, *Six Great Russian Composers* (1946), includes a chapter on Tchaikovsky. John Gee and Elliot Selby, *The Triumph of Tchaikovsky* (1960), and Lawrence and Elizabeth Hanson, *Tchaikovsky: The Man behind the Music* (1966), are undistinguished biographies. The Tchaikovsky-Von Meck correspondence was published in Russian (3 vols., 1933-1936), and a one-volume English abridgment is available. *Beloved Friend* (1937), by Catherine Drinker Bowen and Barbara von Meck, is a fictionalized but not inaccurate account based on the aforementioned letters.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2014 Gale, Cengage Learning.

Source Citation

"Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Biography in Context*. Web. 1 Apr. 2014.

Document URL

http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&mode=view&p;displayGroupName=Reference&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=true&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_results=&p=BIC1&action=e&catId=GALE%7CGOKWKP460493494&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CK1631006424&source=Bookmark&u=dclib_main&jsid=ec049394ae96a783845f192aeed6bbef

Gale Document Number: GALE|K1631006424